

GRESHAM OUTLOOK

Mount Hood plan worthy of support

Mount Hood's importance to the Portland metropolitan area — indeed, to all of Oregon — can be as apparent as the peak itself when it stands in full relief on a crystal-clear winter day.

Those who live in view of Mount Hood value it for its recreational opportunities, for its simple beauty and as a symbol of this region. Other qualities of the mountain — such as its economic effects and its contribution to quality drinking water — aren't so readily noticeable, but they are nonetheless vital elements of everyday life in communities surrounding Mount Hood.

Given the mountain's influence on our way of life, the current proposal by U.S. Reps. Earl Blumenauer and Greg Walden to set aside more wilderness within the Mount Hood National Forest has emerged as a once-in-a-generation opportunity. We're not sure that the two congressmen have included every piece of land that ought to be protected. But their framework represents more than a good start — it is both politically palatable and preservation-minded.

The Blumenauer-Walden concept emerged after two years of study and after the two representatives took an unusual bi-partisan backpacking trip around the mountain. The Democrat and Republican have produced not just a wilderness proposal, but a blueprint for long-term stewardship of the mountain. Their initial plan is to add 75,000 acres of wilderness, a 40-percent increase over the current Mount Hood wilderness acreage. They also suggest an additional 15 miles of designated "Wild and Scenic Rivers."

These new set-asides would not alter timber production within the national forest — harvests that are regulated by the Northwest Forest Plan. The congressmen also have considered other important factors, including recreation, transportation, watershed health and community development.

Some environmental groups have argued that the framework doesn't go far enough. They want more wilderness acres — and we don't necessarily disagree. However, these groups also must recognize that Blumenauer and Walden's overriding goal is to produce a plan that can clear the U.S. House of Representatives. It's entirely possible that once a package of House bills makes it to the U.S. Senate, the legislation could be improved with additional wilderness acres.

The Mount Hood National Forest, which extends from the Columbia River Gorge to the edge of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, serves many masters: hikers, skiers, snowmobile riders, anglers, mountain bikers, forestry workers and hunters. It is the watershed for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians. It attracts economic development from companies seeking quality of life, and it provides jobs in forestry and recreation.

The framework proposed by Walden and Blumenauer attempts to balance all those demands while also considering the obvious need for expanded wilderness protection. Conservation groups would be tragically shortsighted to oppose the plan on the grounds that it contains too little wilderness. The unattractive alternative might be no additional wilderness at all.